INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF VERSATILE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS (IJVRA)
© 2026 IJVRA | Volume 4, Issue 5, May 2026 | ISSN: 2984-8903 | IJVRA.ORG

Classical Marathi Language: An Overview

Sameer Ramchandra Vairagi
Assistant Professor & HoD (Marathi), Government of Maharashtra Ismail Yusuf College

On October 3, 2024, on the auspicious occasion of Ghatasthapana, the Government of India officially accorded the status of 'Classical Language' (Abhijat Bhasha) to the Marathi language. With this, Marathi received official state recognition based on criteria such as its antiquity, originality, continuity, and rich literary tradition.

According to linguists worldwide, the languages of the world are divided into 12 major families. Marathi belongs to the Indo-Aryan group of the Indo-European language family. The initial traces of Marathi can be found around 600 BC when looking at its chronological history.

The Chronological Journey of the Marathi Language

Marathi is not a language that emerged suddenly; rather, it represents the continuous chronological evolution of a single tongue through the following stages:

Ancient Maharatti → Marhatti Language → Maharashtri Prakrit → Apabhramsha Marathi → Modern Marathi

Maharashtri Prakrit, Maharashtri Apabhramsha, and Marathi are not three distinct languages but are three chronological phases of the same language. Maharashtri Prakrit is also known as 'Jain Maharashtri' because Jain writers produced literature on a large scale in this language.

1. Epigraphical and Historical Evidences of Classical Marathi

T0oday, more than 80 literary and manuscript-based proofs establishing that Marathi is over 2,000 years old are preserved at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI).

- The Naneghat Inscription (approx. 2200 years old): Engraved in the Brahmi script, this is the earliest inscription of the primitive Marathi language, explicitly mentioning the word *'Maharatthino'*.
- The Akshi Inscription (1017 AD): Located in the Raigad district, this inscription features nine lines carved in the Devanagari script during the reign of the Shilahara King Keshidevaraya.
- Hattarsang Kudalasangam (1018 AD): Found on the beam of the Sangameshwar temple's assembly hall in Solapur district, this inscription contains the Marathi phrase: *'Yavachi to vijeya ho aiva'*.
- The Shravanabelagola Inscription (1116–17 AD): Carved in the Devanagari script on the left side of the base of the Gomateshwara Bahubali statue, it reads the famous lines: *'Shree Chamundaraye Karaviyale, Shree Gangaraje Suttale Karaviyale'*.
- The Diveagar Copper Plate (1060 AD): Discovered in the Konkan region, this copper plate showcases an ancient form of the Marathi language.
- The Evidence from Tamil Nadu: The Mailgi inscription mentions that facilities to learn the Marathi language existed in Tamil Nadu as early as 1290 AD—a true testament to Marathi's medieval reach. Furthermore, the ancient Sangam literature of the Tamil language (dating back 2300 to 2600 years) notes that *'the masons working on the dam over the Kaveri River spoke Marathi among themselves.'*
- The Chinese Traveller Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang): In his travelogues, he refers to the region of Maharashtra as 'Moholoch'.

2. Literary Evidences of Classical Marathi

Literary Work / Text	**Author / Editor**	**Key Features / Contextual References**
Gatha Saptashati (Gaha Sattasai)	Hala Satavahana (approx. 2000 years ago)	An anthology of 700 folk poems composed by 50 peasant poets living along the banks of the Godavari River. It is the earliest folk literature of Maharashtra. 44 verses were written by King Hala himself.
Prakrit Prakash	Vararuchi (approx. 2000 years ago)	The first grammar text of the Maharashtri (Marathi) language, which explicitly asserts the superiority of Marathi.
Kuvalayamala(778 AD)	Udyotanasuri	This culturally rich romance narrative explicitly mentions the 'Marhatta' language alongside other regional tongues, describing it as a *'Desi Bhasha'* (local language).
Samaraicca Kaha (approx. 800 AD)	Haribhadrasuri	A valuable, novel-like narrative written in ancient Marathi that uniquely incorporates Magical Realism into its storytelling technique.
Lilavai (approx. 800 AD)	Kouhala	An epic poem written in the Marhatta regional language.
Abhilashitartha Chintamani / Manasollasa (1129 AD)	Chalukya King Someshvara	Includes early Marathi verses such as *'Jene rasatala unu veda aniyele...'*

References in Classical Sanskrit Drama:

The oldest forms of Marathi are preserved in the dialogues of characters from legendary plays like Kalidasa's *'Abhijnanasakuntalam'* and Shudraka's *'Mrcchakatikam'*.

Example from Abhijnanasakuntalam: "Tujjha na ane hihayam mama una kamo divami ratimmi | Nigvina ! tavai vasiam...."

3. Medieval Masterpieces of Marathi Literature

During the medieval period, Marathi literature flourished across diverse traditions, producing around 1.5 million verses spanning Saint poetry (Sant Kavya), Pandit poetry (Panditi Kavya), and Balladry (Shahiri Kavya). This vast corpus rivals the literature of any other contemporary Indian language in both quality and quantity.

- **Leela Charitra (1278 AD) – Mhaimbhat Saralekar:**

Considered a sacred scripture of the Mahanubhav sect, this is the first prose biography in Marathi. It chronicles the life of the sect's founder, Chakradhar Swami, and offers a vivid socio-cultural, religious, and philosophical portrait of Yadav-era Maharashtra. It also contains the earliest recorded Marathi folk tale, *'Salaiche Ghar Menache'* (The Story of the Sparrow and the Crow).

- **Dnyaneshwari (1290 AD) – Sant Dnyaneshwar:**

Written by Sant Dnyaneshwar while leaning against a sacred pillar at the Mahalasa Devi temple in Nevasa on the banks of the Pravara River, this work is an unparalleled commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. Also known as *Bhavarthadipika* or *Dnyandevi*, the saint himself endearingly referred to his work as a 'Deshikar Lene' (an ornament of the native tongue).

- **Sant Tukaram's Abhang Gatha (17th Century):**

Written in authentic, colloquial Marathi, this text is an immortal masterpiece of 17th-century philosophy. Sant Tukaram, hailed as a great people's poet, popularized the indigenous 'Abhang' metrical stanza format. Sant Santaji Jagnade served as the scribe who penned down these verses.

Conclusion

Linguistic history confirms that Marathi did not originate *from* Sanskrit; rather, it is as ancient as Sanskrit itself, effectively making them sister languages. The Satavahana rulers were the earliest patrons of Maharashtri, which was simply the ancient avatar of Dnyaneshwar-era Marathi.
In the preface to the Hindi dictionary *'Prakrit Shabdamaharnav'*, Pandit Haragovindadas Sheth notes, *"The Marathi and Konkani languages emerged from Maharashtri Apabhramsha."* Scholar Rajaramshastri Bhagwat estimates the age of the Marathi language to be at least 2,500 years.
Ultimately, when evaluated against the strict benchmarks of antiquity, originality, structural continuity, literary heritage, and geographical reach, Marathi stands on its own merit as an undisputed Classical Language.

Bibliography / References

1.*'Report of the Marathi Classical Language Committee – 2013'*, Department of Marathi Language, Government of Maharashtra.
2.Tulpule, S. G., *'Yadavkalin Marathi Bhasha'* (Yadav-era Marathi Language), 1973.
3.Kulkarni, K. P., *'Marathi Bhasha: Udgam ani Vikas'* (Marathi Language: Origin and Development), 1933.
4.Joshi, S. B., *'Marhati Sanskruti: Kai Samasya'* (Marhati Culture: Some Issues), 1980.
5.Karve, Irawati, *'Marathi Lokanchi Sanskruti'* (The Culture of Marathi People), 1962.